

Comparative Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis: A Conceptual Review of Reflexive Thematic, Interpretative Phenomenological, and Narrative Methods

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Keywords— *Qualitative data analysis, reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, narrative inquiry, data analysis strategies*

Received: 04 Jan 2025;

Received in revised form: 01 Feb 2026;

Accepted: 06 Feb 2026,

Published on: 12 Feb 2026

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Abstract— *This paper presents a comparative conceptual review of major qualitative data analysis approaches, focusing on reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry. Although reflexive thematic analysis is part of the broader tradition of thematic analysis, it is examined here as a distinct approach because of its specific epistemological assumptions, analytical procedures, and strong emphasis on researcher reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2021). The study explores how these three approaches differ in their engagement with data, construction of meaning, and interpretation of participants' experiences. It compares their philosophical foundations, the role of the researcher in knowledge production, and their methods of developing analytical claims (Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008). Rather than presenting new empirical findings, the paper synthesises methodological literature to examine how coding, theme development, interpretation, and reflexivity are understood and practised within each tradition. Particular attention is given to the researcher's positionality, analytical transparency, and theoretical engagement in shaping qualitative interpretations. Through systematic comparison, the study identifies key similarities and differences in how qualitative data are organised, interpreted, and evaluated. It shows how different analytical choices influence clarity, depth, and credibility in qualitative research. By bringing these approaches together, the study offers clear guidance to help researchers understand their options and analyse data more effectively in complex social research.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative data analysis plays a central role in qualitative research because it shapes how researchers interpret participants' accounts and construct analytical findings. Different approaches to qualitative analysis are based on different assumptions about data, meaning, and interpretation, and therefore lead to different forms of knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Crotty, 1998). Understanding these differences is important for ensuring that analytical choices are theoretically coherent and methodologically transparent.

Among the wide range of qualitative data analysis approaches, reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative

phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry are three of the most widely used and well-established traditions in social research (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008). These approaches are frequently discussed in methodological literature and are commonly applied in studies based on interviews and textual data. For this reason, they provide a useful basis for comparative analysis.

Although these approaches share a commitment to in-depth engagement with qualitative data, they differ in their analytical focus and objectives. Reflexive thematic analysis aims to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset, with emphasis on how themes are actively

developed through the researcher's engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021). The primary analytical goal is to explore shared meanings and recurring patterns across participants.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis, by contrast, focuses on a detailed examination of how individuals understand and make sense of their personal experiences. Rather than prioritising patterns across a large dataset, IPA begins with close, case-by-case analysis of each participant before considering points of convergence and divergence (Smith et al., 2009). The emphasis is therefore placed on individual meaning-making rather than on cross-case thematic patterns.

Narrative inquiry differs from both approaches by treating participants' accounts as structured stories rather than as sources of themes or experiential descriptions. It examines how experiences are organised into narratives, how events are sequenced, and how identities are constructed through storytelling practices (Riessman, 2008). Analytical attention is directed towards the form, content, and function of narratives within social and cultural contexts.

Despite these differences, reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry share several important features. All three approaches rely on close reading of qualitative data, involve the researcher's interpretative engagement, and recognise that meaning is co-constructed through the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Riessman, 2008). None of these methods assumes that data can be analysed in a purely objective or mechanical way.

Rather than presenting new empirical findings, this paper offers a comparative conceptual review of these three approaches. It examines how reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry differ in their theoretical orientations, analytical aims, and procedures for working with qualitative data. By systematically comparing their assumptions, processes, and analytical outputs, the study aims to clarify both the distinctive features and the points of overlap between these traditions.

Through this comparative perspective, the paper contributes to methodological scholarship by providing a clearer account of how different qualitative analysis approaches generate different forms of interpretation. It also offers practical guidance for researchers seeking to select and justify analytical frameworks that are consistent with their research questions and theoretical commitments.

II. ANALYTICAL TRADITIONS IN QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

This section introduces the three qualitative data analysis approaches examined in this study: reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and

narrative inquiry. Rather than comparing these approaches at this stage, the section first outlines their theoretical foundations, analytical aims, and key procedures. This provides a clear basis for the comparative analysis presented in the following sections.

2.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis approach that focuses on identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within a dataset. It was developed and refined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021) as a flexible method applicable across diverse research topics and theoretical perspectives.

Unlike earlier forms of thematic analysis that emphasised coding reliability and agreement among researchers, reflexive thematic analysis views analysis as an active, interpretative process. In this approach, themes are not treated as objective categories that exist within the data. Instead, they are understood as analytical constructions developed through the researcher's engagement with the data, theory, and research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021).

A central feature of reflexive thematic analysis is its emphasis on researcher reflexivity. Researchers are encouraged to reflect on how their personal background, values, assumptions, and theoretical position influence the analytical process and the development of themes. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, reflexive thematic analysis treats interpretation as an essential and productive part of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The analytical process in reflexive thematic analysis typically involves several interconnected phases, including familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and analytical writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These phases are not followed in a rigid sequence. Instead, researchers move back and forth between them as their understanding of the data develops.

Coding in reflexive thematic analysis is primarily used to explore meaning rather than to measure frequency. Codes capture interesting features of the data that are relevant to the research questions, while themes represent broader patterns that bring together related codes into coherent analytical narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2021). As a result, the quality of analysis is evaluated on the basis of conceptual depth, coherence, and transparency rather than statistical reliability.

Reflexive thematic analysis can be used within a range of epistemological and theoretical frameworks, including realist, constructionist, and critical perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This theoretical flexibility makes it suitable for diverse research contexts, but it also places responsibility on researchers to clearly articulate their analytical position and justify their methodological choices.

Overall, reflexive thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible approach to qualitative data analysis that foregrounds researcher interpretation, reflexivity, and theoretical engagement. Its emphasis on meaningful pattern development and transparent analytical practice makes it a valuable tool for researchers seeking to produce rich and well-grounded qualitative interpretations.

2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach that explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. It was developed by Smith and colleagues (Smith et al., 2009) and is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The main aim of IPA is to understand how people interpret significant events, emotions, and situations in their personal lives.

Unlike approaches that prioritise patterns across large datasets, IPA emphasises the detailed examination of individual accounts. Researchers typically work with small samples and analyse each participant's interview in depth. The focus is on understanding the participant's perspective while also recognising the researcher's role in interpreting that perspective (Smith et al., 2009).

A key feature of IPA is the concept of the double interpretation process. Participants try to make sense of their own experiences, and researchers, in turn, try to make sense of the participants' interpretations. This means that analysis involves both participants' meaning-making and the researcher's analytical engagement with the data (Smith et al., 2009).

The analytical process in IPA usually involves close reading of transcripts, detailed note-taking, the development of emergent themes, and careful connections of themes within and across cases. Analysis begins with each individual participant before broader patterns are considered. This step-by-step approach helps researchers remain close to the data and preserve the richness of personal experience.

In IPA, coding and theme development are used to support deep interpretation rather than broad categorisation. Themes are designed to capture important aspects of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Quality in IPA is therefore evaluated in terms of depth of insight, sensitivity to context, and clarity of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is most commonly used in studies that aim to explore subjective experiences related to health, identity, migration, education, and emotional well-being. Its strong focus on individual meaning makes it particularly suitable for research questions that seek to understand how people experience and interpret complex personal and social situations.

Overall, interpretative phenomenological analysis provides a rigorous and systematic approach to examining lived experience. By prioritising detailed individual analysis and

careful interpretation, IPA enables researchers to produce rich, nuanced accounts of personal meaning and sense-making processes.

2.3 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach that examines how people construct meaning through stories. It is based on the idea that individuals understand and communicate their experiences by organising them into narratives that link past events, present situations, and future expectations (Riessman, 2008). Rather than treating interviews as sources of themes or isolated experiences, narrative inquiry views them as structured accounts with their own internal logic.

The main focus of narrative inquiry is on how stories are told, what is included or excluded, how events are ordered, and how identities are presented. Researchers analyse both the content of narratives and the ways in which narratives are shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Riessman, 2008).

In narrative inquiry, analytical attention is directed towards elements such as plot, characters, turning points, and moral positioning. This allows researchers to examine how participants present themselves, justify their actions, and make sense of their lives through storytelling. Meaning is understood as emerging from the structure and performance of narratives rather than from isolated statements.

The analytical process in narrative inquiry may involve examining single life stories, interview sequences, or collections of related narratives. Researchers may focus on different levels of analysis, including the personal level (individual stories), the interpersonal level (interaction between participant and researcher), and the broader social level (dominant cultural narratives) (Riessman, 2008).

Unlike reflexive thematic analysis and IPA, narrative inquiry does not aim primarily to identify shared patterns or individual psychological experiences. Instead, it seeks to understand how experiences are organised into meaningful stories over time. This makes narrative inquiry particularly suitable for research on identity, migration, life transitions, and social change.

Narrative inquiry also emphasises reflexivity and interpretation. Researchers are encouraged to reflect on how their questions, assumptions, and social positions influence the stories that participants tell and how these stories are analysed. Interpretation is therefore seen as an integral part of narrative analysis rather than a separate stage.

Overall, narrative inquiry offers a powerful approach for examining how people use stories to construct meaning, identity, and continuity in their lives. Its focus on narrative structure, context, and performance enables researchers to explore the complex relationship between experience, language, and social reality.

2.4 Debates in Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis has long been characterised by ongoing debates concerning interpretation, objectivity, and the role of the researcher. These debates reflect broader discussions within qualitative methodology about how knowledge is produced and how meaning should be understood in social research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Silverman, 2017).

One central debate concerns the status of interpretation in qualitative analysis. Some traditions have emphasised systematic procedures and standardised techniques in order to enhance consistency and credibility. Others argue that interpretation is a necessary and valuable part of qualitative research. They suggest that excessively minimising the researcher's involvement can hide important aspects of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). This tension is particularly evident in discussions of thematic analysis, where debates continue over the roles of reflexivity, coding practices, and analytical transparency.

A related debate focuses on the concept of objectivity. Earlier qualitative approaches often tried to present research as neutral and detached from the researcher. In contrast, recent research literature recognises that researchers are influenced by their social background, cultural experiences, and theoretical perspectives, and that these factors shape how data are understood and interpreted (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). From this perspective, complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, credibility is achieved through reflexive awareness, transparent reporting, and critical engagement with data and theory.

Another important area of debate concerns the criteria for evaluating quality in qualitative research. Traditional notions of reliability and validity, derived from quantitative paradigms, have been widely questioned within qualitative methodology. In response, scholars have proposed alternative criteria such as credibility, coherence, reflexivity, and analytic depth (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Braun and Clarke, 2021). These criteria emphasise the importance of interpretative rigour rather than statistical measurement.

Debates have also emerged about how much flexibility and how much structure qualitative analysis should include. Some approaches, such as reflexive thematic analysis, allow researchers to adapt their analytic process to different research questions and data types. Researchers can decide how to code, develop themes, and engage with theory. This flexibility can be useful in many contexts. However, when this flexibility is not guided by a clear theoretical position, clear research aims, and an explicit understanding of how meaning is being interpreted, the analysis may remain mainly descriptive. In such cases, researchers may organise data into categories but may not explain how these categories relate to broader concepts, social contexts, or

existing theories (Crotty, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Silverman, 2017). As a result, the analysis may focus on repeating participants' words rather than developing deeper and more conceptually informed interpretations.

Other approaches, such as IPA, follow more clearly defined analytic steps and provide detailed guidance for each stage of analysis. For example, researchers are expected to read transcripts several times, write detailed notes, develop themes for each participant, and then carefully connect themes across cases. This step-by-step structure helps researchers work closely with the data and maintain analytic depth (Smith et al., 2009). At the same time, because IPA requires intensive attention to each individual case, it may be less suitable for very large datasets or very broad research questions. In such situations, the strict focus on detailed case analysis may limit the scope of the findings.

Finally, there is an ongoing discussion about the relationship between theory and data in qualitative analysis. Some approaches prioritise inductive engagement with data, allowing concepts and interpretations to emerge gradually. Others emphasise the importance of theoretical frameworks in guiding analysis from the outset. Current qualitative research increasingly understands theory and data as working together throughout the analysis, rather than as two separate steps in which data are analysed first and theory is applied later (Crotty, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Taken together, these debates highlight that qualitative data analysis is not a neutral technical activity but a theoretically informed and interpretative practice. Understanding these ongoing discussions provides an important context for comparing reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, and for evaluating their respective strengths and limitations within qualitative research.

2.5 Quality and Reporting in Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis is often judged not only by what the findings say, but also by how clearly the researcher explains the path from data to interpretation. For this reason, quality in qualitative research is closely tied to transparency and coherence in analysis and reporting (Silverman, 2017; Tracy, 2010). However, what counts as "good quality" differs across qualitative approaches. The standards used to evaluate a reflexive thematic analysis, an IPA study, or a narrative inquiry differ because the aims and outputs of these approaches differ (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

A common source of confusion is the attempt to apply quantitative-style criteria, such as reliability in the statistical sense, to interpretative qualitative work. In many qualitative traditions, the goal is not to produce identical findings across different analysts, but to produce well-grounded and clearly argued interpretations that make sense within the

chosen theoretical position (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). This does not mean “anything goes.” Instead, the researcher is expected to show how interpretations were developed, why they are plausible, and how they connect to the data.

One widely used way of strengthening quality is to provide a clear account of analytic decisions. In practice, this includes explaining how the approach was selected, how data were engaged with, how interpretation progressed, and how final claims were developed (Silverman, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reporting guidelines such as COREQ and SRQR reflect this broader expectation that qualitative studies should be described in a way that enables readers to understand the study design, analysis, and claims (Tong et al., 2007; O’Brien et al., 2014). Although these checklists do not replace methodological thinking, they remind researchers that transparency is part of credibility.

In reflexive thematic analysis, quality is often linked to the depth and coherence of themes, the clarity of the analytic narrative, and the researcher’s reflexive engagement. Braun and Clarke emphasise that themes should be meaningful patterns actively developed through analysis, rather than simple topic headings that merely repeat what participants said (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In reporting, this typically means showing how themes help answer the research question, how they connect to the dataset, and why the interpretation is convincing. Reflexivity in reflexive thematic analysis is also not a short personal statement; it should be visible in analytic choices, such as what was prioritised, how interpretations were framed, and how theoretical commitments shaped meaning-making (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2010).

In IPA, quality is closely connected to careful engagement with individual cases and a clear link between interpretation and participants’ meaning. IPA aims to produce rich and detailed accounts of experience. Analysis is weakened when researchers make broad claims without first showing how these claims are closely linked to careful and detailed reading of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Strong IPA reporting typically shows sustained attention to the participant’s account, uses extracts that support interpretative points, and demonstrates sensitivity to context. IPA researchers are also expected to be explicit about how interpretations were developed and how the researcher’s perspective shaped the data’s interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

In narrative inquiry, quality involves showing how the analysis attends to narrative structure, sequence, and context, rather than only extracting statements as if they were theme fragments. As Riessman (2008) explains, narrative analysis can examine what is told, how it is told, and the social conditions under which stories are produced. Strong narrative reporting clearly explains what the analysis focuses on (for example, how the story is structured, how it

is told, or what it contains). It also explains what is treated as the “story” in the data and shows how ideas about identity, time, and meaning are developed by examining narrative features, rather than by simply grouping statements into themes (Riessman, 2008; Tracy, 2010).

Across all three approaches, one practical implication is that “validity” depends on how well the research question, the analysis method, the data, and the findings fit together. When these parts are consistent, the study becomes clearer and more convincing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe credibility and trustworthiness as core concerns in qualitative research, supported by practices that make interpretation defensible to readers. Tracy (2010) similarly argues that high-quality qualitative research shows coherence, transparency, and ethical attention to representation. These ideas translate into simple but important reporting habits: explain the analytic steps in a way that aligns with the approach, present sufficient evidence to support the interpretation, and present the findings as an argument rather than a list.

Finally, discussions of quality also connect directly to ethics. When the analysis is unclear, readers cannot judge whether participants have been represented fairly or whether quotes have been used responsibly. Good reporting therefore supports ethical practice by showing how interpretations were developed and by avoiding selective or decontextualised use of participants’ accounts (Tracy, 2010; Riessman, 2008). In short, quality in qualitative analysis is not only about methodological rigour; it is also about responsible knowledge production.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS APPROACHES

This section compares reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry by examining how they approach qualitative data, develop interpretations, and produce analytical findings. Rather than treating these approaches as isolated methods, the comparison focuses on their key analytical features and practical implications for qualitative research.

To make the comparison clear and well organised, this study uses a small number of common criteria to examine the three approaches. These criteria are based on well-known methodological sources and repeated discussions in qualitative research about how analysis is carried out (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). They include issues such as how data are understood, the main aim of the analysis, the researcher’s role, how the analysis is conducted, and how findings are presented. Using these shared criteria makes it easier to see both the similarities and the differences between the approaches.

Specifically, the comparison focuses on five interrelated dimensions: (1) views of data and meaning, (2) analytical focus and aims, (3) role of the researcher, (4) analytical procedures, and (5) forms of analytical outcomes. Together, these dimensions capture how each approach conceptualises qualitative data, organises analysis, and generates knowledge claims.

The first dimension, views of data and meaning, concerns how each approach understands the relationship among participants' accounts, social reality, and interpretation. The second dimension, analytical focus and aims, concerns whether analysis prioritises shared patterns, individual experiences, or narrative structures. The third dimension, role of the researcher, examines how researcher involvement, reflexivity, and interpretation are conceptualised. The fourth dimension, analytical procedures, addresses how data are coded, organised, and analysed to produce analytical findings. The final dimension, analytical outcomes, considers the forms in which results are presented, such as themes, experiential accounts, or narrative analyses.

By structuring the comparison around these dimensions, this section aims to provide a clear and balanced account of the main similarities and differences between reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry. This framework also supports transparent evaluation of how different analytical choices shape research interpretations and methodological coherence.

The following subsections apply the comparative framework to each approach in turn and synthesise key similarities and differences across the three traditions.

3.1 Comparative Framework

To compare reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry in a systematic and meaningful way, this study adopts a structured comparative framework.

Rather than focusing solely on separate technical steps, such as coding or grouping data, the framework aims to show how each approach understands data, conducts analysis, and develops interpretations as a whole.

The framework is informed by key methodological discussions in qualitative research, particularly those that emphasise the relationships among theory, analysis, and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2017). It reflects commonly recognised dimensions of qualitative analysis and provides a shared basis for examining similarities and differences across approaches.

Five analytical dimensions guide the comparison. First, views of data and meaning refer to how each approach conceptualises participants' accounts and their relationship to social reality and interpretation. Second, analytical focus

and aims concern whether analysis prioritises shared patterns, individual experiences, or narrative structures. Third, the role of the researcher examines how researcher involvement, reflexivity, and interpretative authority are understood. Fourth, analytical procedures address how data are coded, organised, and developed into analytical findings. Fifth, analytical outcomes consider the forms in which results are presented and communicated.

These dimensions are not treated as fixed or independent categories. Rather, they are understood as interconnected aspects of qualitative analysis that jointly shape how knowledge is produced. For example, if a researcher views data as reflecting shared social meanings, they may focus on identifying common patterns across participants and use coding to group similar experiences into themes, as in reflexive thematic analysis. If, instead, the researcher views data as expressions of personal lived experience, they may focus on individual accounts and use coding to support detailed case-by-case interpretation, as in interpretative phenomenological analysis. Recognising these connections helps to produce a more careful and coherent comparison.

By applying this framework, the study seeks to move beyond simple descriptions of methods and to examine how different analytical traditions operate in practice. The framework, therefore, provides a foundation for the detailed comparative analysis presented in the following section.

3.2 Cross-Method Comparison

Table 1, below, presents a systematic comparison of reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry across the five analytical dimensions outlined in Section 3.1.

The comparison highlights both shared features and important differences between the three approaches. All three rely on careful reading of qualitative data and recognise that interpretation is central to the analytical process. None of the approaches treats data as neutral or self-explanatory, and all emphasise the role of the researcher in constructing meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

Reflexive thematic analysis focuses primarily on identifying patterns of meaning across a dataset. Its main strength lies in its flexibility and its capacity to produce coherent thematic accounts that capture shared experiences across participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021). The approach is particularly useful for studies aiming to explore common social processes, collective experiences, or recurring forms of meaning.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis differs from reflexive thematic analysis in its strong emphasis on individual experience. Rather than beginning with cross-participant patterns, IPA prioritises detailed examination of each participant's account. This allows for deep exploration of how individuals understand and interpret significant life

events (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is therefore especially suited to research questions concerned with personal meaning, emotional experience, and identity development. Narrative inquiry adopts a distinct analytical focus by treating participants' accounts as stories. Its primary concern is not only what participants say, but how they

organise their experiences into narratives and how these narratives are shaped by social and cultural contexts (Riessman, 2008). This makes narrative inquiry particularly valuable for research on life histories, migration trajectories, and the construction of identity over time.

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Qualitative Data Analysis Approaches

Dimension	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Narrative Inquiry
View of data and meaning	Data are interpreted as sources of shared patterns of meaning shaped by the researcher's interpretation	Data are understood as accounts of personal lived experience	Data are treated as structured stories that construct meaning
Analytical focus and aims	Identifying and interpreting patterns across a dataset	Understanding how individuals make sense of experience	Examining how experiences are organised into narratives
Role of the researcher	Active and reflexive interpreter of meaning	Co-interpreter of participants' sense-making	Interpreter of narrative structure and context
Analytical procedures	Flexible coding and theme development	Detailed case-by-case analysis and theme development	Analysis of story structure, content, and context
Analytical outcomes	Thematic accounts supported by data extracts	Rich descriptions of individual experience	Narrative analyses of life stories and identities

Despite these differences, several important similarities can be seen across these approaches. All three approaches require sustained engagement with qualitative data, involve interpretative judgement, and demand reflexive awareness of the researcher's role. They also emphasise transparency in analytical decision-making and the importance of linking interpretations to empirical material (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Riessman, 2008).

At the same time, the approaches generate different types of analytical outputs. Reflexive thematic analysis produces thematic representations of shared meaning, IPA generates detailed accounts of individual experience, and narrative inquiry offers structured interpretations of life stories. These differences have important implications for how findings are presented and how knowledge claims are justified within qualitative research.

By making these similarities and differences explicit, the comparative analysis clarifies how analytical choices shape research outcomes. It also provides a basis for selecting approaches that are aligned with specific research aims, theoretical commitments, and forms of qualitative data.

3.3 Methodological Alignment Between Research Questions and Analytical Approaches

An important outcome of the comparative analysis is the recognition that qualitative data analysis approaches are most effective when they are closely aligned with research questions and analytical aims. Different methods are designed to address different types of questions, and mismatches between research aims and analytical

approaches can weaken the clarity and coherence of qualitative findings.

Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly suitable for studies that aim to explore shared meanings, social processes, and recurring patterns across participants. Research questions such as "How do individuals experience a particular social phenomenon?" or "What common challenges are faced by a specific group?" are well aligned with this approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021). When used in this way, reflexive thematic analysis enables researchers to produce systematic and conceptually rich accounts of collective experience.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is more appropriate for research that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of personally significant events or situations. Questions such as "How does a person understand a major life transition?" or "What does a particular experience mean for an individual?" reflect IPA's analytical focus (Smith et al., 2009). Applying IPA to large datasets or broad social questions may limit its capacity to provide detailed insight into personal meaning. Narrative inquiry is best suited to research questions that focus on life histories, identity development, and processes of change over time. Questions such as "How do people construct their life stories?" or "How are experiences shaped through personal and cultural narratives?" align closely with the analytical aims of narrative research (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry is therefore particularly valuable for longitudinal and biographical studies.

The comparison also highlights the importance of aligning analytical approaches with data type and research design. Reflexive thematic analysis can be applied to a wide range of qualitative materials, including interviews, focus groups, and written texts. IPA typically requires detailed, in-depth interview data that allows for close examination of personal experience. Narrative inquiry often benefits from extended accounts, repeated interviews, or life history materials that support story-based analysis.

When analytical alignment is weak, several methodological risks may arise. These include superficial interpretation, limited analytical depth, and unclear connections between data and findings. For example, using IPA to analyse brief survey responses or applying narrative inquiry to fragmented interview extracts may restrict meaningful interpretation. Similarly, applying reflexive thematic analysis without clear theoretical grounding may lead to descriptive rather than analytical results.

By contrast, strong methodological alignment supports analytical transparency and interpretative coherence. Clearly linking research questions, data types, and analytical approaches enables researchers to justify their methodological decisions and to produce findings that are both conceptually grounded and empirically supported (Silverman, 2017).

Overall, this section demonstrates that thoughtful alignment between research aims and analytical approaches is central to high-quality qualitative research. A comparative understanding of reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, therefore, provides a practical foundation for selecting methods that are appropriate, defensible, and analytically productive.

3.4 Illustrative Applications of Analytical Approaches

To further clarify the distinctions between reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, this section provides brief illustrative examples of how the same type of qualitative data might be analysed differently under each approach. The aim is not to present empirical findings, but to demonstrate how analytical orientation shapes interpretation.

Consider a hypothetical interview extract in which a participant describes migrating to a new country and experiencing feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and gradual adaptation. Although the raw data remain the same, the analytical outcome would differ depending on the chosen method.

If analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher would examine the dataset as a whole and identify recurring patterns across participants. For example, themes such as “initial disorientation,” “social isolation,” or “rebuilding belonging” might emerge. The focus would be on

identifying shared experiences and constructing themes that capture broader patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The final analysis would likely present a structured set of themes supported by illustrative extracts.

In contrast, interpretative phenomenological analysis would focus on the detailed exploration of how the individual participant makes sense of migration. The analysis would examine specific language choices, emotional expressions, and reflective statements in order to understand how the participant interprets their own experience (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than prioritising cross-participant themes, the emphasis would remain on the depth and nuance of the individual’s meaning-making process.

Using narrative inquiry, the researcher would approach the same account as a story. The analysis would examine how the participant structures their migration journey: how events are sequenced, where turning points occur, how challenges are framed, and how identity is constructed within the narrative (Riessman, 2008). Attention would be paid not only to content but also to the organisation and performance of the story.

These examples illustrate that analytical approaches do not simply “organise” data differently; they generate different forms of knowledge. Reflexive thematic analysis produces patterned thematic representations. IPA produces detailed experiential interpretations. Narrative inquiry produces structured narrative accounts. Each approach foregrounds different aspects of the data while backgrounding others.

The illustrative comparison also highlights the importance of analytical intention. When researchers aim to understand shared social processes, reflexive thematic analysis may provide conceptual clarity. When the aim is to explore personal meaning in depth, IPA may be more appropriate. When research focuses on identity construction and temporal change, narrative inquiry may offer greater analytical sensitivity.

By demonstrating how an analytical orientation shapes interpretative outcomes, this section reinforces the paper’s central argument: qualitative data analysis approaches are not interchangeable techniques but theoretically grounded practices that produce distinct forms of understanding.

3.5 A Practical Decision Guide for Selecting an Analytical Approach

The comparative framework presented in this paper can be translated into a practical decision guide that helps researchers select an analytical approach that fits their aims and data. This section does not treat methods as a checklist. Instead, it offers a clear set of questions that researchers can use to justify selecting reflexive thematic analysis, IPA, or narrative inquiry in a defensible way (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

The first decision point concerns the primary analytic aim. If the main goal is to understand shared meanings across a

group or to describe common patterns across participants, reflexive thematic analysis is often a strong choice. It is designed to build themes that represent patterned meaning across a dataset, while recognising the active role of the researcher in constructing those themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021). If the goal is instead to explore how a person understands a significant experience in detail, IPA is often more appropriate because it focuses on careful engagement with individual accounts and personal meaning (Smith et al., 2009). If the goal is to understand how people organise experience into stories, especially over time, narrative inquiry provides tools to examine sequence, turning points, identity positioning, and how stories are shaped by social context (Riessman, 2008).

The second decision point concerns the type and shape of data. Reflexive thematic analysis can be used with many kinds of qualitative material, including interviews, focus groups, diaries, online texts, and open-ended responses, because it is oriented toward identifying patterns of meaning rather than requiring a specific data structure (Braun and Clarke, 2021). IPA generally works best with rich, detailed interviews or texts that allow close engagement with how a person describes and reflects on their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Narrative inquiry typically benefits from extended accounts, life histories, multiple interviews, or materials that preserve story sequence and development, since narrative analysis depends on temporal ordering and the structure of telling (Riessman, 2008).

The third decision point concerns what the “finding” will look like. Reflexive thematic analysis usually produces a set of themes supported by extracts and explained through an analytic narrative (Braun and Clarke, 2021). IPA typically produces detailed interpretative accounts that foreground the participant’s experience and meaning, often presented through case-focused writing and carefully chosen extracts (Smith et al., 2009). Narrative inquiry produces narrative interpretations that focus on story form, identity, and context, and may present full or partial stories, turning points, or narrative segments as analytic objects (Riessman, 2008). Thinking about the intended output early helps researchers avoid presenting findings in a format that does not match the chosen approach.

The fourth decision point concerns theoretical position and the role of interpretation. All three approaches are interpretative, but the kind of interpretation differs. Reflexive thematic analysis explicitly foregrounds the researcher’s role in constructing themes and encourages reflexive engagement with assumptions and theory (Braun and Clarke, 2021). IPA focuses on interpreting how participants make sense of experience and requires the researcher to engage closely with language, emotion, and meaning within each account (Smith et al., 2009). Narrative inquiry interprets how stories are produced and how identity

is constructed through storytelling, often linking personal accounts to wider social narratives and cultural contexts (Riessman, 2008). Being clear about the nature of interpretation helps researchers justify why one approach fits better than another.

A final decision point concerns feasibility and analytic depth. IPA and narrative inquiry often require more time per participant because analysis is typically intensive and detailed. Reflexive thematic analysis can be efficient, but only if researchers avoid superficial theming and invest in concept-building and interpretative depth (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Silverman, 2017). Feasibility should not be the main reason for method choice, but it is relevant when deciding what is realistic while maintaining analytic quality.

To clarify these decisions, Table 2 summarises practical “fit” questions that can be used in a method’s justification. The aim is to support researchers in writing method rationales that are short but convincing, and that show alignment between the research question, the data, and the analytical approach (Silverman, 2017; Tracy, 2010).

Table 2. Practical fit questions for method selection

If your main aim is shared patterns across people → consider reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

If your main aim is detailed personal meaning for each person → consider IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

If your main aim is how lives are told as stories over time → consider narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008).

If your data are brief and fragmented → narrative inquiry may be difficult; reflexive thematic analysis may fit better (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Riessman, 2008).

If your output needs to be themes → reflexive thematic analysis fits; if it needs to be case-focused meaning → IPA fits; if it needs to be story-based interpretation → narrative inquiry fits (Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

Overall, this decision guide reinforces the paper’s main argument: qualitative analysis approaches are not interchangeable. They represent different analytic goals and different ways of producing interpretation. When researchers make these differences explicit and justify the match between aims, data, and approach, qualitative analysis becomes clearer, stronger, and easier for readers to evaluate (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Silverman, 2017).

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses the main theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of the comparative analysis. By examining reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry together, the study demonstrates how analytical choices shape the interpretation of qualitative data, the construction of findings, and the production of knowledge.

A central insight of the analysis is that qualitative data analysis approaches are defined by distinct analytical purposes. Reflexive thematic analysis is primarily oriented towards identifying shared patterns of meaning across participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis focuses on developing a detailed understanding of individual lived experience. Narrative inquiry concentrates on how people organise their lives and identities through stories over time (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008). These different orientations influence how data are examined, coded, and transformed into analytical accounts.

The findings also highlight the central role of the researcher in all three approaches. In reflexive thematic analysis, researchers actively construct themes through continuous engagement with data and theory. In IPA, researchers interpret participants' efforts to make sense of personal experiences. In narrative inquiry, researchers analyse how stories are structured and situated within broader social contexts. In each case, interpretation is understood as an essential element of rigorous qualitative analysis rather than a methodological limitation.

An important methodological implication concerns the alignment between research questions, data, and analytical approaches. The comparison shows that analytical coherence is strengthened when research aims are clearly matched with appropriate methods. Studies focusing on shared social processes are well-suited to reflexive thematic analysis. Research concerned with personal meaning and emotional experience benefits from IPA. Investigations of identity development and life trajectories are particularly compatible with narrative inquiry. Such alignment enhances analytical depth and strengthens the credibility of qualitative findings (Silverman, 2017).

The analysis further demonstrates the importance of transparent methodological justification. Clearly explaining theoretical positioning, analytical procedures, and interpretative decisions allows readers and reviewers to evaluate the quality and coherence of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Crotty, 1998). Comparative understanding, therefore, supports more reflective and defensible research practice.

From a policy perspective, the findings have important implications for evidence-based decision-making across education, health, migration, and social welfare. Qualitative research frequently informs policy debates by highlighting lived experiences and social needs. Reflexive thematic analysis can support the identification of shared challenges; IPA can reveal the individual impacts of policy interventions; and narrative inquiry can illustrate long-term social processes and structural inequalities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Riessman, 2008). Understanding these analytical differences enhances the responsible use of qualitative evidence in policy development.

Ethical considerations are closely connected to analytical practice. The way data are interpreted and presented shapes how participants' voices are represented and understood. Reflexive thematic analysis promotes ethical awareness through reflexivity and transparency. IPA requires sensitivity to participants' emotional experiences and personal meanings. Narrative inquiry raises issues related to story ownership, confidentiality, and long-term representation (Tracy, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Ethical qualitative research, therefore, depends on careful alignment between analytical choices and ethical responsibilities.

The interdisciplinary relevance of the three approaches is also evident. Reflexive thematic analysis is widely used in interdisciplinary research because of its flexibility and adaptability. IPA is prominent in psychology and health-related disciplines, while narrative inquiry is frequently applied in education, anthropology, and social policy studies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Comparative understanding supports clearer communication and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries and facilitates more integrated research practices.

The discussion also highlights recurring analytical challenges, including superficial interpretation, unclear theoretical positioning, limited reflexivity, and inappropriate methodological combinations. Without careful methodological reflection, these problems may weaken analytical depth and ethical integrity (Silverman, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Awareness of such risks enables researchers to strengthen analytical rigour and develop more robust interpretative frameworks.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual review, the analysis is based on selected methodological literature and does not examine empirical case studies in detail. Although this approach allows for systematic comparison, future research could extend the present framework through applied methodological studies and empirical illustrations.

Overall, this section demonstrates that analytical decisions in qualitative research have far-reaching theoretical, practical, and ethical consequences. By clarifying the distinctive contributions and limitations of reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, this study supports more coherent, transparent, and responsible qualitative research practice.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a comparative conceptual review of reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry as major approaches to qualitative data analysis. By examining their

theoretical foundations, analytical aims, and practical applications, the study has highlighted both the distinctive features and shared characteristics of these methods.

The analysis demonstrates that each approach offers a particular way of engaging with qualitative data and producing interpretation. Reflexive thematic analysis supports the exploration of shared patterns of meaning across participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis enables a detailed understanding of individual lived experience. Narrative inquiry provides insight into how people construct meaning through stories over time. These differences underscore the importance of selecting analytical approaches that align with specific research questions and contexts.

By systematically comparing these approaches, the study contributes to methodological scholarship by clarifying how analytical traditions shape research outcomes. Rather than viewing qualitative analysis methods as interchangeable tools, the findings emphasise the need to understand them as theoretically grounded practices that influence how knowledge is produced and communicated.

The paper also highlights the practical, ethical, and interdisciplinary implications of analytical decision-making. Transparent justification of methodological choices, reflexive engagement with data, and sensitivity to participants' experiences are essential for producing credible and responsible qualitative research. Comparative understanding can therefore support more thoughtful and accountable research practice.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual review, the analysis is based on selected methodological literature and does not include empirical illustrations. Future research could extend this work by examining how these analytical approaches are applied in specific empirical contexts or by exploring additional qualitative methods within similar comparative frameworks.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the value of comparative analysis for advancing understanding of qualitative data analysis. By offering a clear and accessible account of reflexive thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, the paper provides a foundation for more informed, coherent, and reflective analytical practice in qualitative research.

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